

Guidance for winter Severe Weather Emergency Protocol (SWEP) in Greater London 2022-23

This guidance is produced for London local authority rough sleeping lead officers and their colleagues involved in the provision of services for people sleeping rough in the capital.

This guidance should be read in conjunction with the *Winter Provision and SWEP Toolkit 2022*¹, which provides advice for local authorities nationwide.²

1. Background

SWEP is an emergency humanitarian response to severe weather conditions, the primary aim of which is to preserve life.

Since winter 2017/18, the GLA has provided guidance for London's councils regarding local **SWEP** plans. This guidance, which has been agreed by all 33 London councils, introduced a trigger point for **pan-London SWEP activation** of 0°C on any one night to ensure consistency across the capital.

Each borough is expected to make its own local **SWEP** provisions for those sleeping rough in the area. The capacity of local provision should be informed by an assessment of need undertaken at the borough level.

In addition, the GLA funds '**overflow provision**' accessible by any London borough when local **SWEP** provision reaches capacity.

2. Terminology

SWEP is Severe Weather Emergency Protocol

Activation is the opening of SWEP to new referrals

Deactivation is the closing of SWEP to new referrals

Pan-London activation is the centrally coordinated activation of SWEP by the GLA across all London boroughs and including GLA overflow provision

Overflow provision is GLA-funded SWEP provision accessible by all London boroughs when local provision reaches capacity

In for Good is the principle under which once a person is supported to access shelter or accommodation they are not asked to leave until there is a support plan in place to end their rough sleeping.

¹ The Homeless Link guidance can be found [here](#).

² Reference can also be made to the Greater London Authority (GLA)'s Review of Winter SWEP 2017/18, which includes multiple best-practice recommendations, and Review of SWEP response during winter 2020/21, which outlines some learning around how London can continue to successfully deliver SWEP in the context of the pandemic. Both documents can be found attached at the bottom of [this webpage](#).

3. Guidance on borough SWEP provision

The Mayor asks that all London councils adhere to the following minimum standards for **SWEP**:

- local **SWEP** capacity should match the anticipated level of need in the area;
- councils should continue to ensure *at least* the same level of **SWEP** provision as in the previous year, unless there has discernibly been a reduction in anticipated need to below that number of beds;
- while **SWEP** may be provided in a variety of settings, each council should ensure that their accommodation can be easily accessed from across the borough (by foot, public transport, or SWEP-specific arrangements and by both people sleeping rough and the services working them);
- councils should ensure that local **SWEP** options can always be easily accessed, including out of hours, by all outreach teams operating in their borough;
- **SWEP** for every council across London will be triggered and activated when any part of the capital is forecast to be 0°C or lower overnight. The GLA will coordinate this **pan-London activation of SWEP**;
- councils will commit to implementing the ‘**In for Good**’ principle. This means that once someone has accessed **SWEP** shelter, they are sheltered/accommodated until a support plan is in place to end their rough sleeping - regardless of whether the temperature has risen above 0°C^{3,4}.

It is also encouraged that councils try to ensure **SWEP** provision is well suited to the needs and circumstances of the people sleeping rough in the borough who are likely to need it. For example, where there is a need, providing women only spaces within SWEP accommodation⁵.

Councils should prepare for the need for daytime **SWEP** provision in the event of exceptionally prolonged or extreme cold weather. For example, this could be done by arranging 24/7 access to shelter or by working with local partners to extend opening hours or capacity in local day centres.

Where there are local protocols in boroughs that already exceed these guidelines, councils should of course continue operating their current good practice, local leads are simply requested to notify GLA where local provision is available outside of pan-London activation periods.

SWEP is an emergency response, and as such it is expected that councils will work together in that spirit of cooperation. Specifically, providing shelter should not be considered as accepting a local connection or constitute a relief duty.

³ A support plan is considered to consist of an assessment of needs and eligibility, a service offer, and a nominated lead support agency.

⁴ It is recognised that some people will have very limited options due to issues outside of the local authority's control; for this reason it is expected that local authorities will work towards this goal, rather than being able to guarantee its delivery in every case.

⁵ Further information on setting up women's spaces within homelessness service can be found [here](#).

4. Pan-London overflow SWEP provision

The GLA funds **overflow SWEP** provision. Once capacity is full within a given council's individual **SWEP** provision, **SWEP overflow provision** will be available for referrals from that council.

When **SWEP** is active, the SWEP coordinator for an area has the responsibility for notifying St Mungo's at swep@mungos.org and the GLA at roughsleepingcommissioning@london.gov.uk when their emergency accommodation is close to capacity and **overflow provision** may be required. Where possible, notification of anticipated need should be made by midday to allow the overflow provision to prepare.

Where there is capacity within the borough's own emergency provision, it is expected that all rough sleepers will be accommodated there, rather than in the GLA's **overflow provisions**.

Councils should ensure that where **local SWEP provision** is available, these beds can be easily and swiftly accessed at all times by outreach teams, including by the Rapid Response team. Boroughs are encouraged to thoroughly 'road test' their systems for accessing local SWEP provision (including out of hours) because **overflow SWEP** cannot be used where local provision isn't full, regardless of any difficulties accessing this.

Arrangements for access to **overflow SWEP** will be circulated to Local Authority Rough Sleeping Leads along with **SWEP** alerts if/when **SWEP** is activated. As usual, the GLA will collate information from boroughs of their key contacts and planned capacity.

5. Public health considerations

Historically, a large proportion of **SWEP** provision had been through the use of shelters and communal spaces in commissioned services. The COVID-19 pandemic meant that the nature of service provision, and the specifics of how services are operated had to be reconsidered. Evidence suggests that the rough sleeping population remain vulnerable to COVID-19 and other respiratory infections (e.g. flu). Therefore, single room accommodation remains the preference to minimise infectious disease transmission.

It may be possible that combining reductions in accommodation density, increases in social distancing, stringent hygiene measures, universal mask-wearing, and screening of staff/service users, can help reduce COVID-19 incidence in communal accommodation for people experiencing rough sleeping, but is **unlikely to prevent all outbreaks**.

However, local authorities should also consider the other health risks posed by people remaining on the streets, particularly in cold weather, and the opportunity through providing accommodation and other support services to improve health.

The GLA's position for its **overflow SWEP provision** is that single-occupancy accommodation will always be the first preference. In the scenario that demand exceeds all available single-occupancy bedspaces and there are no viable alternatives, some small-scale communal

sleeping arrangements could be used for **SWEP**, with extensive mitigation measures in place (See Appendix A). However, this approach may need to be adjusted, should an increase in the prevalence or severity of respiratory infections change the balance of risks.

The above contingency plan for the delivery of the GLA's **overflow provision** is **not** given as guidance to councils for **local SWEP** arrangements. Should any local authority be considering using communal sleeping arrangements in the event of a shortage of single-occupancy accommodation during severe weather, it's recommended that this is first agreed with the relevant Director of Public Health and/or public health team.

Local authorities can also consult the [operating principles](#) for night shelters published by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities in August 2022. This outlines key principles for maintaining public health in night shelter settings. There is also extensive national guidance at gov.uk on managing COVID and other infectious diseases.

London-specific guidance and resources for the safe operation of homelessness services in the context of COVID-19 can be found on the [Healthy London Partnership website](#), including how to access COVID testing and advice from the Find and Treat service.

6. Monitoring

Councils and their services should make every attempt to record all local **SWEP** stays on CHAIN.. This should include recording of people accommodated each night and the demographics and support needs of those using the emergency spaces. This will allow councils to monitor use of their own SWEP accommodation and enable a comprehensive evaluation of **SWEP** provision at a pan-London level, informing future provision, and facilitating further improvements to the protocol in following years. The CHAIN team can provide more information about this at chain@homelesslink.org.uk .

It is, however, recognised that a requirement to record details on CHAIN can, in some instances, be a barrier to people accessing **SWEP**. So, while CHAIN recording is strongly encouraged it is not an absolute requirement.

If you have any questions regarding this document, please contact: roughsleepingcommissioning@london.gov.uk.

Appendix A

Mitigation measures in the event that small scale communal sleeping (≤5 people) is needed for GLA overflow SWEP provision

- Those sharing the provision would be made aware of the potential infection risk.
- Shared accommodation would not be used for those who are clinically extremely vulnerable and other vulnerabilities, including age, will also be considered.
- Changes (throughput) in those sharing a room would be minimised.
- There would be symptom screening (for respiratory infections) prior to entry.
- A thorough health screening, including vaccination status, would be part of the initial assessment, with access to vaccines offered for all those who are eligible.
- Measures would be in place for rapid recognition of symptoms, rapid testing on entry and isolation of any symptomatic and/or positive cases.
- Staff regularly tested for COVID-19.
- A range of Infection Prevention Control (IPC) strategies such as hand washing, ventilation and social distancing would be put in place.
- Enhanced environmental cleaning implemented.
- Ensuring there is a means to contact trace individuals when they move on.
- Opportunities to promote vaccination and GP registration would be maximised.

These mitigation measures were agreed and presented to the Life Off the Streets Core Group on 10th October 2022.